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Women

Women, feminist economics and the production of life in the Latin American context

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Based on the situation in Latin America, this article aims to reflect on the role of women in ensuring the structural conditions for a mode of life and production, with a particular emphasis on respect for and defence of common goods, and on a critique of the sexual and international division of labour. We hope it raises some points that can help to advance the debate on this topic among the anticapitalist left.

The feminist economy and women's lives

Resistance to the attacks of patriarchal capitalism has been a constant in women's lives, especially in the South of the world. The struggles to forge experiences in the countryside and in the city that place life at the center, to the detriment of the market, which seeks to impose on us paradigms of oppression and exploitation, have women as their main political subjects. In this sense, feminist economics aims to serve as an instrument that can re-signify what is conceived as work, whether paid or not. That means everything that is essential for the production of goods and services that guarantee life, including the care and affection that all people need to exist and live well.

On the basis of feminist economics, it is possible to demonstrate the interconnection between the reproduction of life and the production of commodities, showing that the reproductive work carried out largely by women is not only the foundation of all wealth production, but especially what guarantees the production of living, where the sustainability of human and non-human life cannot be guided by the interests of the market and profit. Thus feminist economics does not separate the demands of the social division of labor that today are intertwined with the realization of capitalism as a global system which articulates patriarchy and racism to usurp territories and common goods.

Latin American women and feminists who are involved in the collective construction of new paradigms based on their analyses, debates and concrete experiences, seek to base their struggles simultaneously on these three pillars, the anti-patriarchal, the anti-capitalist and the anti-racist, in order to move towards 'good living'. In times of climate crisis and global warming brought on by a predatory and unsustainable system, there is a patent need to speed up the transition to other ways of producing, consuming, and organizing life. This is what feminist economics proposes, and it is on this basis that it strives to change the lives of women and transform the world in which we want to live.

What do women produce? Expropriation, invisibility and resistance in Latin America

The separation between production and reproduction, as well as the sexual division of labour, is the logic that guides the capitalist economy to exploit and subject women. It assumes that some tasks and functions performed in society are masculine and others, feminine. This logic goes hand in hand with an overvaluing of the tasks considered masculine. The sexual division of labour also structures a separation between the production of commodities (goods and services with an exchange value in the market place) and the reproduction of people (the men or women who produce those commodities). Reproductive work ensures the material conditions (food, hygiene, rest, health care) as well as the affective ones (encouraging self-esteem, the ability to listen, to mediate conflicts and negotiate), but it remains invisible and devalued, without even being measured or considered work. Reproduction takes place in family units and in the domestic arena, and to this day it is the women who do most of this work, dedicating much more time to it than men.

It is clear that productive work is incompatible with the logic and rhythm of reproductive work and caring for life. With double or triple working hours, women try to reconcile these two dimensions of work, even though this costs them enormous overload, physical strain and illness. It is not only a matter of making domestic work and caring work visible, but also of showing that it too is part of the so-called productive work, and that both types of work can be carried out by men and women. The attempts to socialize reproductive work made by women's groups in some Latin American countries seek not only to recognize their economic significance, but also their importance for social cohesion and individual and collective development. The collective organization of reproductive work helps the learning, autonomy and more horizontal socialisation of children, young people, men and women. In Brazil, the "cirandas" of Via Campesina make the care and education of children and adolescents a collective responsibility of the whole movement. In several indigenous territories of Peru and Ecuador, as well as in other countries, the work of caring and preparing food is done collectively for the whole community, which reduces the time spent on domestic labour and guarantees food security and sovereignty.

Currently in Latin America, an increasing precariousness of both the productive and reproductive work done by women is the result of the extractive industries (mining, logging), agribusiness and other megaprojects (construction of the IIRSA plan, the diverting of rivers). All these activities are responsible for the pillaging and appropriation of common goods in the continent (water, energy, land and territory), as well as for destroying local economies and breaking up the ancestral forms of social reproduction, which are impacted and redirected by the presence of these companies. When this kind of highly masculinised, productive economy takes over a community, it emphasizes the sexual division of labour and increases the undervaluation of the work of care historically carried out by women.

Privatization of water and other common goods (either by limiting access or by contaminating the available sources) creates an overload in the work done by women, who need to travel longer distances to fetch water. Moreover, they have to take care of people who fall ill because of environmental contamination, without receiving any kind of compensation from the State and without being relieved of their other regular workloads.

The loss of economic autonomy is also another effect resulting from these activities on the lives of women, since they no longer have the resources that guarantee fishing (because of the death of the fish or the lack of access to the rivers), the growing of their own food (because of the contamination of water and soil, and the genetic erosion of seeds). Apart from this threat to the food sovereignty of women and their communities, they also stop trading and marketing their food production.

This loss of autonomy for the communities, and imposition of a capitalist economic logic, makes women's role and their ancestral knowledge even more invisible. All this goes along with a great deal of violence against women, because they end up taking a central role in the defence of their territories, which also increases the criminalization of women who resist, several of whom have been murdered without the crimes ever being brought to justice.

Challenges and tasks for the left and anticapitalist feminism

The neodevelopmentalist, economicist and consumerist paradigm has been brought into our continent and established here over the last two decades. In a way, the so-called "Washington Consensus" has taken on a new garb in Latin America and presents itself as a "Commodity Consensus," based on the exploitation of "strategic natural resources," where common goods are nothing more than commodities that open the doors to a kind of "New Eldorado". The challenge for left organizations with a critical perspective (including some from the feminist movement) is not to give in or be seduced by such an "Eldorado vision", where the reproduction of life and common goods are disregarded, in a reworking of the old developmentalist myth.

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Encouraged by the diversity of ideas and practices of native peoples, peasants and Afrodescendants, and fed by the exchange between academic knowledge and that produced by anticapitalist, ecosocialist and feminist organizations and movements, the ideas of feminist economics stand in opposition to the technocratic view, which seeks to rationalize 'natural resources' and instrumentalize the knowledge and contributions of women and these peoples.

This commitment to collective work and rejection of a top-down approach implies a transformative approach, overcoming a crisis of civilization and redefining ethically and politically the conditions needed for "good living" (el buen vivir). It draws on the analyzes and proposals made decades ago by feminist economics, whose questioning of the dominant conceptions of the economy and wealth, postulate the environmental and human dimensions as central and inseparable. Therefore, contributions from the experiences of self-organization demonstrate that our feminism is a constituent part of a political project for society, which we are involved in building. It is not a chapter apart, and if there are not changes in the structures that combine the different dominations and oppressions, equality and autonomy will not be a reality for all women.

Promoting an anti-capitalist and ecological feminism, based on the activism and analyses of women's experiences in grassroots movements and grassroots organizations, re-igniting and critically updating Marxist and feminist theories, cannot be the task of only leftist feminists, but of all socialists and communists. Recognising and sharing the work needed for the production of life, advancing in the changes necessary for the depatriarchalisation of the State, of public policies and of our organizations, is part of this task.

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